

Yardley and Short November 15

Walter Short will forever be tainted by the December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor disaster. He was the Army general who, along with Navy Admiral Husband Kimmel, was blamed when the Japanese caught our forces off guard, resulting in a military disaster. Short had been responsible for defending US military installations on Hawaii. Among his actions prior to the attack was placing our aircraft too close together, making them easier targets for Japanese attack aircraft and too hard to launch in defense of the islands.

This article is not about Pearl Harbor though. Short, earlier in his career, had been the chief of the Military Intelligence Division (MID) Far Eastern Subsection on the War Department General Staff. On June 12, 1922, Short, then a major, requested that MID Section 8 (MI-8) decrypt the following short coded message:

GEMOZOJEGI JYLEXYDUKU DEJIVYVARY VOGAXYCEJI



Herbert Yardley

MI-8, aka the Cipher Bureau, was the Army's codebreaking section headed by Herbert Yardley. Yardley at the time was probably at his zenith in influence among U.S. cryptologists as his MI-8 had just provided decrypts of Japanese diplomatic messages that allowed the United States to out negotiate the Japanese at the 1921-1922 Washington Naval Disarmament Conference. The message which Short wanted decrypted had been sent from Tokyo to Li Liezhun in Guilin, China, in October 1921. Li was an important Chinese revolutionary leader and general in the early years of the new Chinese republic (1911).

Yardley responded on July 5, 1922, by stating that the message was in Chinese code and "we could scarcely be in a position to read it without a great deal of additional material." His response was not sent to Short's office directly; Yardley wrote in his response to his superiors that he did not know how much Major Short knew about MI-8's operations.

Indeed, the problem was not enough material according to Yardley. On July 25, he noted that his office was not able to read another Chinese encrypted message from April 20, 1922, because “we have never made a study of the Chinese codes and unless we have several hundred messages at our disposal it would be impossible to read them.”

Chinese codes at the time were essentially codebook-based, (and were not machine-generated until after World War II). The letters used in Short’s code above do not spell out any obvious Romanized Chinese words. CCH readers are welcome to take a crack at decryption of this message if they wish.

As China became more politically volatile (with an anti-American component) in the next few years, China would become a more important target. In 1927, for example, Yardley’s office handled 175 Chinese messages, successfully breaking four Chinese systems.

Sources: “Dashed Expectations: Limitations of the Telegraphic Service in the Late Qing” by Wook Yoon, *Modern Asian Studies*, 49, 3 (2015); background information on Walter Short and Li Liejun from internet sources